

THE
ATHENIAN CAPTIVE.



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THE
ATHENIAN CAPTIVE.

A TRAGEDY.

IN FIVE ACTS.

BY

THOMAS NOON TALFOURD.

AUTHOR OF "ION," &c.

FIRST ACTED AT COVENT GARDEN THEATRE, APRIL 28, 1838.

LONDON:
EDWARD MOXON, DOVER STREET.

MDCCCXXXVIII.

BRADBURY AND EVANS.
PRINTERS-EXTRAORDINARY TO THE QUEEN,
WHITEFRIARS.



TO
THE RIGHT HON. THOMAS LORD DENMAN,

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE OF HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF QUEEN'S BENCH,

IN TESTIMONY OF DEEP ADMIRATION

OF THOSE QUALITIES WHICH WERE THE GRACE AND DELIGHT
OF THE BAR,

AND WHICH HAPPILY ADORN THE BENCH ;

AND IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF MANY CHEERING KINDNESSES ;

This Tragedy

IS, WITH HIS PERMISSION,

RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY

THE AUTHOR.

P R E F A C E.

THE existence of the following scenes is entirely to be attributed to the earnest desire which I felt, to assist, even in the slightest degree, the endeavour which Mr. Macready has made this season in the cause of the acted Drama. More than contented with the unhopèd for association I had obtained with the living influences of scenic representation, in the indulgence accorded to “ Ion,” I should have postponed all thought of again venturing before the public, until years had brought leisure, which might enable me to supply, by labour and by care, what I knew to be wanting in the higher requisites of tragic style. But I could not perceive a gentleman, whose friendship I had long enjoyed, forsaking the certain rewards of his art, and the tranquil pleasures of domestic life, to engage in the chivalrous

endeavour to support a cause, which I believe to be that of humanity and of goodness, and which seemed almost desperate, without a feverish anxiety to render him assistance, and perhaps a tendency to mistake the will for the power. The position of the two great theatres—with a legal monopoly, which has been frittered away piecemeal without recompense, until nothing remains but the debts which were contracted on the faith of its continuance, and the odium of its name;—opposed to a competition with numerous establishments, dividing the dramatic talent and dissipating the dramatic interest of the town,—rendered the determination of Mr. Macready to risk his property, his time, and his energies in the management of one of them, a subject of an interest almost painful. Impressed with this sentiment, at a time when it was unforeseen that one of the most distinguished of our authors would lend his aid—when no tragic creation of Knowles “cast its shadow before,” with its assurance of power and of beauty,—when the noble revivals of Lear and of Coriolanus were only to be guessed at from those of Hamlet and Macbeth,—I determined to make an attempt, marked, I fear, with more zeal than

wisdom. Having submitted the outline of this Drama to the friend and artist most interested in the result, and having received his encouragement to proceed, I devoted my little vacation of Christmas to its composition;—and, with the exception of some alterations (for the suggestion of the principal of which I am indebted to him,) succeeded so far as to finish it before the renewal of other (I can hardly say) severer labours. Whether I may succeed in doing more than thus gratifying my own feelings, and testifying their strength by the effort, is, at this time, doubtful;—but, in no event, shall I regret having made it.

At this period I can only, of course, imperfectly estimate the extent of the obligation I shall owe to the performers; but, as no other opportunity may occur, I cannot refrain from thanking them for the zeal and cordiality with which they have thus far supported me. Among them I am happy to find my old and constant friend, Mr. Serle,—who should rather be engaged in embodying his own conceptions than in lending strength to mine. And I cannot refrain from mentioning the sacrifice made to the common

cause by Miss Helen Faucit, in consenting to perform a character far beneath the sphere in which she is entitled to move; and which, even when elevated and graced by her, will, I fear, be chiefly noted for her good-nature in accepting it.

The First Scene of the Third Act, and the Second Scene of the Fourth Act, are omitted in the representation; and some alterations, suggested at rehearsal, have been made in the conduct of the closing Scene.

T. N. T.

Russell Square, 28th April, 1838.

Persons of the Drama,

AS REPRESENTED AT COVENT GARDEN THEATRE.

CREON . .	King of Corinth	MR. WARDE.
HYLLUS .	Son of Creon	MR. ANDERSON.
IPHITUS .	Priest of the Temple of Jupiter the } Avenger, at Corinth }	MR. SERLE.
CALCHAS .	An Athenian, living at Corinth . .	MR. WALDRON.
THOAS .	An Athenian Warrior	MR. MACREADY.
PENTHEUS	An Athenian Warrior, his Friend .	MR. DIDDEAR.
LYCUS . .	Master of the Slaves to the King of } Corinth }	MR. HOWE.

Athenian and Corinthian Soldiers, &c.

ISMENE .	Queen of Corinth ; second wife of } Creon }	MRS. WARNER.
CREUSA .	Daughter of Creon ; twin-born of } his first wife with Hyllus . . }	MISS HELEN FAUCIT.

SCENE—*Corinth, and its immediate neighbourhood.*

TIME OF ACTION—*Two days.*

THE
ATHENIAN CAPTIVE.

A TRAGEDY.

ACT I.

SCENE I.

The Acropolis of Corinth.

CREON *reclining on a bench, beneath open columns.*—

IPHITUS *a little behind him, in the dress of Augury, watching the flight of birds. The Sea seen far below, in the distance.*

IPHITUS.

Wheel through the ambient air, ye sacred birds,
In circles still contracting, that aspire
To share the radiance of yon dazzling beams,
And 'midst them float from mortal gaze ; ye speak
In no uncertain language to the sons
Of Corinth, that the shames they bear from Athens
Shall speedily be lost in glories won

From insolent battalions, that have borne
Their triumphs to our gates. Rejoice, my king !
Leave mournful contemplation of the dust,
To hail the omen !

CREON.

I am so perplex'd
With the faint tracings age's weakness shapes,
That I distinguish not the winged forms
Thou speakest of, from the mists that flicker quick
On eyes which soon must be all dark. To me
No omen can be otherwise than sad !

IPHITUS.

Surely, my king—for I will answer thee
Untrembling, as Jove's minister—these signs
Should make thy heart beat proudly ; hast not felt
Upon our loftiest eminence, the blight
Of that dishonour which alone can slay
The spirit of a people ;—seen our fanes
Crowded with suppliants from our wasted fields,
Shrieking for help in vain, and mourn'd the power
Of Athens to convert our cloudless sky,
And the bright sea which circles us, to bounds
Of a great prison ? If thy kingly soul
Hath shrunk—as well I know it hath—from shame
Without example in our story, now
Bid it expand, as our beleaguer'd gates

Shall open wide to let our heroes pass,
With brows which glisten to receive the laurel
From their king's hand.

CREON.

Perchance to see him die.

O, Iphitus! thy king hath well nigh spent
His store of wealth, of glory, and of power,
Which made him master of the hopes and strengths
Of others! While the haggard Fury waits
To cut the knot which binds his thousand threads
Of lustrous life, and the sad ghost forsakes
The palace of its regal clay, to shrink,
Thin as a beggar's, sceptreless, uncrown'd,
Unheeded, to the throng'd and silent shore
Where flattery soothes not, think'st thou it can draw
A parting comfort from surrounding looks
Of lusty youth, prepar'd, with beaming joy,
To hail a young successor?

IPHITUS.

Still thine age
Is green and hopeful; there is nought about thee
To speak of mortal sickness, and unnerve
A soul that once was noble.

CREON.

Priest, forbear!

The life that lingers in me is the witness

With which I may not palter. I may seem
To-day to wear the look of yesterday,—
A shrivell'd, doting, peevish, weak old man,
Who may endure some winters more to strip
A leaflet daily from him, till he stands
So bare of happiness, that Death hath scarce
An art to make him nakeder. My soul
Begins its solemn whispers of adieu
To earth's too sweet companionship. Yet, hark !
It is Creusa's footstep ; is't not, priest ?
Is not my child approaching us ?

IPHITUS.

Afar

I see the snowy foldings of a robe
Wave through the column'd avenue ; thy sense
Is finer than the impatient ear of youth,
That it should catch the music of a step
So distant and so gentle.

CREON.

If thou wert
A father, thou wouldst know a father's love
'Mid nature's weakness, for one failing sense
Still finds another sharpen'd to attend
Its finest ministries. Unlike the pomps
That make the dregs of life more bitter, this
Can sweeten even a king's.

[CREUSA passes across the stage behind CREON, bearing offerings.]

She passes on ;
So ! So ! all leave me. Call her, Iphitus,
Though that her duty own no touch of fondness,
I will command her. Am I not her king ?
Why dost not call ?

Re-enter CREUSA, who kneels in front to CREON.

Ah ! thou art there, my child ;
Methinks my waning sight grows clear, to drink
The perfect picture of thy beauty in ;
And I grow gentle—Ah ! too gentle, girl—
Wherefore didst pass me by without regard,
Who have scant blessing left save thus to gaze
And listen to thee ?

CREUSA.

Pardon me, my father,
If, bearing offerings to the shrine of Jove
For my sweet brother's safety, anxious thoughts
Clove to him in the battle with a force
Which made its strangest shapes of horror live
As present things ; and, lost in their pursuit,
I heeded not my father.

CREON.

In the battle ?
Is Hyllus in the combat 'mid those ranks
Of iron ? He who hath not rounded yet

His course of generous exercise? I'm weak ;
Is that the cause? Is he impatient grown
To put the royal armour on, his sire
Must never wear again? Oh, no! his youth,
In its obedient gentleness, hath been
An infancy prolong'd! It is the Power
Which strikes me with the portents of the grave,
That by the sight of his ensanguined corpse
Would hasten their fulfilment; 'tis well aim'd,
I shall fall cold before it.

CREUSA.

'Twas a word,
Dropp'd by the queen in answer to some speech
In which she fancied slight to Athens, rous'd
His spirit to an ecstasy; he spurn'd
The light accoutrements of mimic war;
Borrow'd a soldier's sword, and, with the troops
Who sallied forth at day-break, sought the field—
Where Jupiter protect him!

CREON.

Bid the queen
Here answer to us. [Exit IPHITUS.]

Rarely will she speak,
And calmly, yet her sad and solemn words
Have power to thrill and madden. O my girl,
Had not my wayward fancy been enthrall'd

By that Athenian loveliness which shone
From basest vestments, in a form whose grace
Made the cold beauty of Olympus earth's,
And drew me to be traitor to the urn
Which holds thy mother's ashes, I had spent
My age in sweet renewal of my youth
With thought of her who gladden'd it, nor known
The vain endeavour to enforce regard
From one whose heart is dead amidst the living.

Re-enter IPHITUS.

CREON.

Comes the queen hither? Does she mock our bidding?

IPHITUS.

At stern Minerva's inmost shrine she kneels,
And with an arm as rigid and as pale
As is the giant statue, clasps the foot
That seems as it would spurn her, yet were stay'd
By the firm suppliant's will. She looks attent
As one who caught some hint of distant sounds,
Yet none from living intercourse of man
Can pierce that marble solitude. Her face
Uprais'd, is motionless,—yet while I mark'd it—
As from its fathomless abode a spring
Breaks on the bosom of a sullen lake
And in an instant grows as still,—a hue
Of blackness trembled o'er it; her large eye

Kindled with frightful lustre ;—but the shade
Pass'd instant thence ; her face resum'd its look
Of stone, as death-like as the aspect pure
Of the great face divine to which it answered.
I durst not speak to her.

CREON.

I see it plain ;
Her thoughts are with our foes, the blood of Athens
Mantles or freezes in her alien veins ;
Let her alone. *[Shouts without.]*

CREUSA.

Hark !—They would never shout
If Hyllus were in peril.

CREON.

Were he slain
In dashing back the dusky wall of shields,
Beneath which Athens masks her pride of war,
They would exult and mock the slaughter'd boy
With Pæans.

CREUSA.

So my brother would have chosen !

[Shouts renewed.]

Enter Corinthian Soldier.

SOLDIER.

Our foes are driven to their tents, the field
Is ours—

CREON. [*Hastily interrupting him.*

What of the prince—my son?

Thou dost avoid his name;—have ye achiev'd
This noisy triumph with his blood?

SOLDIER.

A wound,

Slight, as we hope, hath grac'd his early valour,
And though it draws some colour from his cheek
Leaves the heart fearless.

CREON.

I will well avenge
The faintest breath of sorrow which hath dimm'd
The mirror of his youth. Will he not come?
Why does he linger, if his wound is slight,
From the fond arms of him who will avenge it?

SOLDIER.

He comes, my lord.

CREON.

Make way, there! Let me clasp him!

Enter HYLLUS, pale, as slightly wounded.

Why does he not embrace me?

[CREUSA runs to HYLLUS, and supports him as he moves
towards CREON.]

CREUSA.

He is faint,
Exhausted, breathless,—bleeding. Lean on me,

[*To* HYLLUS.

And let me lead thee to the king, who pants
To bid his youngest soldier welcome.

HYLLUS.

Nay

'Tis nothing. Silly trembler!—See, my limbs
Are pliant and my sinews docile still. [*Kneels to* CREON.
Kneel with me; pray our father to forgive
The disobedience of his truant son,
His first—oh, may it prove the last!

[*CREUSA kneels with* HYLLUS *to* CREON.

CREON.

My son!

Who fancied I was angry?

Enter ISMENE.

(*To* ISMENE.) Art thou come,
To gaze upon the perill'd youth who owes
His wound to thee?

ISMENE.

He utter'd shallow scorn
Of Athens;—which he ne'er will speak again.

CREON.

Wouldst dare to curb his speech?

HYLLUS.

Forbear, my father;

The queen says rightly. In that idle mood,
Which youth's excess of happiness makes wanton,
I slighted our illustrious foes, whose arms
Have, with this mild correction, taught my tongue
An apter phrase of modesty, and shewn
What generous courage is, which till this day
I dimly guess'd at.

CREON.

Canst thou tell his name,
Who impious drew the blood of him who soon—
Too soon, alas!—shall reign in Corinth?

HYLLUS.

One

I'm proud to claim my master in great war;
With whom contesting, I have tasted first
The joy which animates the glorious game
Where fiercest opposition of brave hearts
Makes them to feel their kindred;—one who spar'd me
To grace another fight,—the sudden smart
His sword inflicted, made me vainly rush
To grapple with him; from his fearful grasp

I sank to earth ; as I lay prone in dust,
The broad steel shiv'ring in my eyes, that strove
To keep their steady gaze, I met his glance,
Where pity triumph'd ; quickly he return'd
His falchion to its sheath, and with a hand
Frank and sustaining as a brother's palm,
Uprais'd me ;—while he whisper'd in mine ear,
“ Thou hast dar'd well, young soldier,” our hot troops
Environ'd him, and bore him from the plain
Our army's noblest captive.

CREON.

He shall die ;
The gen'rous falsehood of thy speech is vain.

CREUSA.

O no ! my brother's words were never false ;
The heroic picture proves his truth ;—they bring
A gallant prisoner towards us. Sure, 'tis he.

Enter THOAS, *in armour, guarded by Corinthian Soldiers,*
and LYCUS, *Master of the Slaves.*

SOLDIER.

My lord, we bring the captive, whom we found
In combat with the prince.

HYLLUS.

Say rather, found
Raising that prince whose rashness he chastis'd,
And taught how he should treat a noble foe.

CREON.

[*To the Soldiers.*]

Answer to me ! Why have ye brought this man,
Whom the just gods have yielded to atone
For princely blood he shed, in pride of arms ?
Remove that helmet.

THOAS.

He who stirs to touch
My arms, shall feel a dying warrior's grasp.
I will not doff my helmet till I yield
My neck to your slave's butchery ; how soon
That stroke may fall, I care not.

CREUSA.

[*To HYLLUS.*]

Hyllus, speak !

Why thus transfix'd ? Wilt thou not speak for him
Who spar'd a life, which, light perchance to thee,
Is the most precious thing to me on earth ?

THOAS.

[*To CREUSA.*]

Ere I descend to that eternal gloom
Which opens to enfold me, let me bless
The vision that hath cross'd it !

HYLLUS.

[*To CREON.*]

If thou slay him,
I will implore the mercy of the sword
To end me too ; and, that sad grace withheld,
Will kneel beside his corpse till nature give
Her own dismissal to me.

ISMENE. [*Speaking slowly to CREON.*]

Let him breathe
A slave's ignoble life out here; 'twill prove
The sterner fortune.

CREON.

Hearken to me, prisoner!
My boy hath won this choice—immediate death,
Or life-long portion with my slaves.

THOAS.

Dost dare
Insult a son of Athens by the doubt
Thy words imply? Wert thou in manhood's prime,
Amidst thy trembling slaves would I avenge
The foul suggestion, with the desperate strength
Of fated valour; but thou art in years,
And I should blush to harm thee;—let me die.

CREUSA.

O do not fling away thy noble life,
For it is rich in treasures of its own,
Which Fortune cannot touch, and vision'd glories
Shall stream around its bondage.

THOAS.

I have dream'd
Indeed of greatness, lovely one, and felt
The very dream worth living for, while hope,
To make it real, surviv'd; and I have lov'd

To image thought, the mirror of great deeds,
Fed by the past to might which should impel
And vivify the future ;—blending thus
The aims and triumphs of a hero's life.
But to cheat hopeless infamy with shows
Of nobleness, and filch a feeble joy
In the vain spasms of the slavish soul,
Were foulest treachery to the god within me.
No, lady ; from the fissure of a rock,
Scath'd and alone, my brief existence gush'd,
A passion'd torrent ;—let it not be lost
In miry sands, but having caught one gleam
Of loveliness to grace it, dash from earth
To darkness and to silence. Lead me forth—
(*To CREUSA.*) The Gods requite thee !

CREON.

Hath the captive chosen ?

I will not grant another moment ;—speak !
Wilt serve or perish ?

HYLLUS.

[*Throwing himself before* THOAS.

Do not answer yet !

Grant him a few short minutes to decide,
And let me spend them with him.

CREON.

[*Rising.*

Be it so, then !

Kneel, prisoner, to the prince who won thee grace

No other mortal could have gain'd :—remember
 The master of my slaves attends the word
 Thou presently shalt utter ; tame thy pride
 To own his government, or he must bind,
 And slay thee. Daughter, come ! The queen attends us.

[*Exeunt* CREON and SOLDIERS.]

CREUSA.

[*To* HYLLUS, *as she passes him.*

Thou wilt not leave him till he softens.

[ISMENE *follows ; as she passes* THOAS, *she speaks in a low and solemn tone.*

ISMENE.

Live !

THOAS.

Who gave that shameful counsel ?

ISMENE.

[*Passing on.*

One of Athens. [*Exit.*

[*Exeunt all but* LYCUS, *the Master of the Slaves,—*

THOAS and HYLLUS.

THOAS.

[*Abstractedly.*

What words are these, which bid my wayward blood,
 That centred at my heart with icy firmness,
 Come tingling back through all my veins ? I seem
 Once more to drink Athenian ether in,
 And the fair city's column'd glories flash
 Upon my soul !

LYCUS.

My lord, I dare not wait.

HYLLUS. *[Eagerly to LYCUS.]*

He yields ;—I read it in his softening gaze ;
It speaks of life.

THOAS.

Yes ; I will owe life to thee.

HYLLUS.

Thou hear'st him, Lycus. Let me know the name
Of him whom I could deem my friend.

THOAS.

My name !

I have none worthy of thy ear ; I thought
To arm a common sound with deathless power ;
'Tis past ; thou only mark'st me from the crowd
Of crawling earth-worms ;—thou may'st call me, Thoas.

LYCUS. *[Coming forward.]*

My prince, forgive me ; I must take his armour,
And lead him hence.

THOAS.

Great Jupiter, look down !

HYLLUS.

Thoas, thy faith is pledged. *[To LYCUS.]* Stand back awhile,
If thou hast nature. Thoas will to me
Resign his arms.

THOAS. [*Taking off his helmet.*

To a most noble hand

I yield the glories of existence up,
And bid them long adieu ! This plume, which now
Hangs motionless, as if it felt the shame
Its owner bears, wav'd in my boyish thoughts
Ere I was free to wear it, as the sign,
The dancing image of my bounding hopes,
That imag'd it above a throng of battles,
Waving where blows were fiercest. Take it hence—
Companion of brave fancies, vanish'd now
For ever, follow them !

[HYLLUS takes the helmet from THOAS, and passes it to
LYCUS.]

HYLLUS.

'Tis nobly done ;
No doubt that it again shall clasp thy brow,
And the plume wave in victory. Thy sword ?
Forgive me ; I must filch it for awhile :
Hide it—O deem it so—in idle sport,
And keep thy chidings, till I give it back
Again to smite and spare.

THOAS.

Too generous youth,
Permit my depth of sorrow to be calm,
Unruffled by vain hope. [*Takes off his sword.*
Farewell, old sword,

Thou wert the bright inheritance which grac'd
My finish'd years of boyhood—all that time
And fortune spar'd of those from whom I drew
The thirst of greatness. In how proud an hour
Did I first clasp thee with untrembling hand,
Fit thee, with fond exactness, to my side,
And in the quaint adornments of thy sheath
Guess deeds of valour, acted in old time
By some forgotten chief, whose generous blood
I felt within my swelling veins ! Farewell !

[THOAS gives his sword to HYLLUS, who delivers it to
LYCUS.

HYLLUS.

[*Diffidently.*

Thy buckler ?

THOAS.

[*Takes off his buckler eagerly, and delivers it to HYLLUS.*

I rejoice to part with that ;
My bosom needs no bulwark save its own,
For I am only man now. If my heart
Should in its throbbing burst, 'twill beat against
An unapparell'd casing, and be still. [*Going.*

HYLLUS.

[*Hesitatingly.*

Hold !—one thing more—thy girdle holds a knife ;
I grieve that I must ask it.

THOAS.

By the sense
Which 'mid delights I feel thou hast not lost,

Of what, in dread extremity, the brave,
Stripp'd of all other refuge, would embrace,—
I do adjure thee,—rob me not of this !

HYLLUS.

Conceal it in thy vest.

[THOAS *hastily places his dagger in his bosom,*
and takes the hand of HYLLUS.

THOAS.

We understand
Each other's spirit ;—thou hast call'd me friend,
And though in bonds, I answer to the name,
And give it thee again.

LYCUS (*advancing*).

The time is spent
Beyond the king's allowance : I must lead
The captive to the court, where he may meet
His fellows, find his station, and put on
The habit he must wear.

THOAS.

Do I hear rightly ?
Must an Athenian warrior's free-born limbs
Be clad in withering symbols of the power
By which man marks his property in flesh,
Bones, sinews, feelings, lying Nature framed
For human ? They shall rend me piecemeal first !

HYLLUS.

Thoas—friend—comrade,—recollect thy word,
Which now to break were worse disgrace than power
Can fix upon thee, bids thee bear awhile
This idle shame. I shall be proud to walk
A listener at thy side, while generous thoughts
And arts of valour, which may make them deeds,
Enrich my youth. Soon shall we 'scape the court,
Ply the small bark upon the summer sea,
Gay careless voyagers, who leave the shore
With all its vain distinctions, for a world
Of dancing foam and light; till eve invites
To some tall cavern, where the sea-nymphs raise
Sweet melodies; there shalt thou play the prince,
And I will put thy slavish vestments on,
And yield thee duteous service;—in our sport
Almost as potent as light Fortune is,
Who in her wildest freaks but shifts the robe
Of circumstance, and leaves the hearts it cloath'd
Unchanged and free as ours.

THOAS.

I cannot speak.

Come—or mine eyes will witness me a slave
To my own frailty's masterdom.—Come on!

[*To LYCUS.*

Thou hast done thy office gently. Lead the way. [*Exeunt.*

END OF ACT I.

ACT II.

SCENE I.

A Court in the Palace of CREON.

Enter CREON and LYCUS.

CREON.

How does the proud Athenian bear his part
In servile duty?

LYCUS.

I have never seen
So brave a patience. The severest toils
Look graceful in him, from the facile skill
With which his strength subdues them. Few his words
By question drawn, yet gentle as a child's ;
And if, in pauses of his work, his eye
Will glisten, and his bosom heave ; anon
He starts as from a dream, submissive bows,
And plies his work again.

CREON.

Thou dost espouse
His cause. Beware ! he hurl'd defiance on me,
Disdain'd my age, as if his pride of strength
Made him in bondage greater than a king
Sick and infirm as I am ; he shall feel

What yet an old man can inflict. He comes ;
Why does he leave his duty ?

LYCUS.

'Tis the hour
Of rest—of food, if he would take it ; here
He's privileged to walk.

CREON.

Let's stand aside.

[CREON and LYCUS retire from sight.

Enter THOAS, *in the dress of a Slave.*

THOAS.

Had I been born to greatness, or achieved
My fame, methinks that I could smile at this ;
Taste a remember'd sweetness in the thought
Of pleasure snatch'd from fate ; or feed my soul
With the high prospect of serene renown
Beetling above this transitory shame
In distant years. But to be wither'd thus—
In the first budding of my fortune, doom'd
To bear the death of hope, and to outlive it !
Gods, keep me patient ! I will to my task.

[*Going.*

Re-enter CREON and LYCUS.

LYCUS.

Wilt thou not join thy fellows at the feast,
And taste a cup of wine the king vouchsafes
For merriment to-day ?

THOAS.

What ! are they merry ?

LYCUS.

Dost thou not hear them ?

THOAS.

They are slaves, indeed !

Forgive me, I would rather to the quarry. [Going.

Enter Messenger.

MESSENGER (*addressing* CREON).

My lord, the games in honour of our triumph
Await thee,—first the chariot race, in which
Thy son prepares to strive. The wrestlers next—

CREON.

Let them begin. [Exit Messenger.

Methinks yon captive's strength,
No longer rebel, might afford us sport.
Thoas !

THOAS.

I wait thy pleasure.

CREON.

Thou wert train'd
Doubtless, at home, to manly exercise,
And I would have thee show the youth of Corinth
How the Athenians throw the quoit and wrestle.

THOAS.

My lord, I cannot do it !

CREON.

One so strong
As thou, had he been native here, would joy
In sports like these.

THOAS.

O, have I not enjoy'd them !
My lord, I am content to toil and mourn—
'Tis the slave's part ; these limbs are thine to use
In vilest service till their sinews fail ;
But not a nerve shall bend in sports I lov'd
When freeman to indulge in, for the gaze
Of those who were my foes and are my masters.

Enter Messenger, in haste.

MESSENGER.

My lord—the prince—

THOAS.

Is he in peril ?

MESSENGER.

As his chariot, far
Before all rivals, glitter'd to the goal,
The coursers plung'd as if some fearful thing
Unseen by human eyes had glar'd on theirs ;
Then with a speed like lightning flash'd, along
The verge of the dark precipice which girds
The rock-supported plain, and round it still

In frightful circles whirl the youth ; no power
Of man can stay them.

THOAS.

Friend, I come ! I come !

LYCUS. *[Attempting to stop him.*

Thou must not go.

THOAS.

Away ! I'm master now. *[Rushes out.*

CREON.

My son ! my son ! I shall embrace thy corpse,
And lie beside it. Yet I cannot bear
This anguish ; dead or living, I will seek thee ! *[Exit.*

LYCUS. *[Looking out.*

How the slave spurns the dust ; with what a power
He cleaves the wondering throng,—they hide him now,—
Speed him, ye gods of Corinth !

Enter CREUSA.

CREUSA.

Whence that cry
Of horror mingled with my brother's name ?
Is he in danger ? Wherefore dost thou stand
Thus silently, and gaze on empty air ?
Speak !

Enter IPHITUS. [CREUSA addressing him.

From thy sacred lips the truth
Must flow.

IPHITUS.

Be calm ; thy brother is preserv'd ;
Urg'd by his furious steeds, his chariot hung
Scarce pois'd on the rock's margin, where the vale
Lies deepest under it ; an instant more,
And Hyllus, who serenely stood with eyes
Fix'd on the heavens, had perish'd ; when a form
With god-like swiftness clove the astonish'd crowd ;
Appear'd before the coursers, scarce upheld
By tottering marl ;—strain'd forward o'er the gulf
Of vacant ether ; caught the floating reins,
And drew them into safety with a touch
So fine, that sight scarce witness'd it. The prince
Is in his father's arms.

CREUSA.

Thou dost not speak
The hero's name ;—yet can I guess it well.

IPHITUS.

Thoas.—He comes.

CREUSA.

Let me have leave to thank him.

[*Exeunt* IPHITUS and LYCUS.]

Enter THOAS.

Hero ! accept a maiden's fervent thanks,
All that she has to offer, for a life
Most precious to her.

THOAS.

Speak not of it, fair one !

Life, in my estimate, 's too poor a boon

To merit thanks so rich.

CREUSA.

Not such a life

As his to me. We both together drew

Our earliest breath, and one unconscious crime

Shar'd ; for the hour that yielded us to day

Snatch'd her who bore us. Thence attach'd we grew,

As if some portion of that mother's love

Each for the other cherish'd ; twin-born joys,

Hopes, fancies, and affections, each hath watch'd

In the clear mirror of the other's soul,

By that sweet union doubled. Thou hast sav'd

Two lives in saving Hyllus.

THOAS.

'Tis not meet

That such a wretch as I, in garb like this,

[Looking at his dress, and shuddering.]

Should listen to the speech of one so fair ;

It will unfit me for my tasks.

CREUSA.

Thy tasks ?

O hard injustice !

Enter HYLLUS, CREUSA meeting him.

Brother, join thy thanks
To mine. [HYLLUS and CREUSA embrace.

THOAS.

No more. [Retiring.

Grant, ye immortal gods,
So beautiful a bond be never broken !
[Exit THOAS.

CREUSA.

He speaks of tasks. My brother, can'st endure
To see a hero who hath twice preserv'd
Thy life—upon whose forehead virtue sits
Enthron'd in regal majesty—thus held
In vilest thralldom ?

HYLLUS.

Ah ! my sweet Creusa,
Thy words breathe more than gratitude.

CREUSA.

My brother,
I pray thee, do not look into my face.

HYLLUS.

Nay, raise thy head, and let thine eye meet mine ;
It reads no anger there. Thy love is pure
And noble as thyself, and nobly plac'd ;
And one day shall be honor'd.

CREUSA.

Spare me !

HYLLUS.

Come,

The banquet hath begun ; the king expects us.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE II.

Banqueting-Hall in CREON'S Palace.

CREON, ISMENE, IPHITUS, CALCHAS, *and Corinthians.*
seated at the Banquet.

CREON.

[*Rising.*

I thank ye for my son ;—he is unharm'd,
And soon will join our revelry.

ISMENE.

We lack
Attendance. Where is Thoas ? It were fit
In Corinth's day of triumph, *he* should wait
On his victorious enemies. Go seek him.

[*Exit an Attendant.*

CREON.

I would have spar'd his services to-day ;
He is but young in service, and hath done

A glorious deed. Drink round, my friends, and pledge
My son once more.

ISMENE.

My sovereign, I should deem
So great a master in the skill to tame
The nature struggling in a free-born soul,
Would think it wisdom to begin betimes,
When an Athenian spirit should be stifled.
If thou would'st bend him to the yoke, 'twere best
Commence to-day ;—to-morrow 't may be vain.

Enter THOAS.

Athenian !—slave !—'tis well that thou hast come ;
Else might we fear thou didst not feel so proud
As such a man as thou should feel, to wait
Upon his victor. Carry round the cup,
And bear it to the king, with duteous looks.

THOAS.

I will endeavour, lady.

[Takes the cup, and speaking aside.

They will join

In very openness of heart, to cast
This shame upon me ; take the mantling cup
With thoughtless pleasure from a warrior's hand,
And smile to see it quiver ; bless the wine
With household names, sweet thoughts of friends afar,

Or love which death hath hallowed ; and while springs
Of cordial joy are quicken'd by the draught,
Will bid affections, generous as their own,
Shrink, agonize, and wither !

ISMENE.

Slave ! attend !

Enter HYLLUS and CREUSA.

CREON.

Hyllus, our friends have pledg'd thee ; take thy place,
And thank them.

HYLLUS.

[Advancing.]

I am grateful.—Thoas, thus ?

CREON.

We blam'd thy absence, daughter. Sit beside
The queen.

CREUSA.

A humbler place befits me, father.

[Sits at the end of the circle.]

[THOAS attempts to hand the cup.]

CREUSA.

[To HYLLUS.]

Brother, dost see ?

HYLLUS. *[Aside to THOAS, taking the
cup from him.]*

Thoas, I blush at this ;

Give me the cup.—Corinthian citizens,

This is a moment when I cannot trust
The grace of serving you to any hand
Except mine own. The wine will send a glow
Of rare delight when minister'd by one
Who hath this day touch'd life's extremest verge,
And been most bravely rescued.

[HYLLUS *hands the cup.*

ISMENE.

Will the king

Permit this mockery?

CREON.

Foolish stripling, cease!

Let the slave hand the cup; and having pass'd
Another round, fill high, for I will pour
A great libation out, with such a prayer
As every heart shall echo while the dust
Of Corinth drinks it in.

[THOAS *takes the cup, and approaches* CREUSA.

CREUSA.

Nay, tremble not.

Think thou dost pay free courtesy to one
Who in the fulness of a grateful heart,
Implores the gods to cherish thee with hope
For liberty and honour.

THOAS.

Words so sweet
Reward and o'erpay all.

CREON.

Corinthians, rise !

Before the gods, who have this day espoused
The cause of Corinth, I this votive cup
Pour with one glorious prayer—Ruin to Athens !

[THOAS dashes down the cup he is about to hand to the King.]

THOAS.

Ruin to Athens ! who dares echo that ?
Who first repeats it dies. These limbs are arm'd
With vigour from the gods that watch above
Their own immortal offspring. Do ye dream,
Because chance lends ye one insulting hour,
That ye can quench the purest flame the gods
Have lit from heaven's own fire ?

HYLLUS. [Trying to appease the
guests.]

'Tis ecstasy—

Some phrenzy shakes him.

THOAS.

No ! I call the gods,
Who bend attentive from their azure thrones,
To witness to the truth of that which throbs
Within me now. 'Tis not a city crown'd
With olive and enrich'd with peerless fanes
Ye would dishonour, but an opening world
Diviner than the soul of man hath yet

Been gifted to imagine—truths serene,
Made visible in beauty, that shall glow
In everlasting freshness ; unapproach'd
By mortal passion ; pure amidst the blood
And dust of conquests ; never waxing old ;
But on the stream of time, from age to age,
Casting bright images of heavenly youth
To make the world less mournful. I behold them !
And ye, frail insects of a day, would quaff
“ Ruin to Athens !”

CREON.

Are ye stricken all
To statues, that ye hear these scornful boasts,
And do not seize the traitor ? Bear him hence,
And let the executioner's keen steel
Prevent renewal of this outrage.

IPHITUS.

Hold !
Some god hath spoken through him.

ISMENE.

Priest ! we need
No counsel from thee.

HYLLUS.

Father, he will bend—
’Twas madness—was’t not, Thoas ?—answer *me* :
Retract thy words !

THOAS.

I've spoken, and I'll die.

ISMENE.

'Twere foolish clemency to end so soon
The death-pangs of a slave who thus insults
The king of Corinth. I can point a cell
Deep in the rock, where he may wait thy leisure
To frame his tortures.

HYLLUS.

[To CREON.]

If thou wilt not spare,
Deal with him in the light of day, and gaze
Thyself on what thou dost, but yield him not
A victim to that cold and cruel heart.

ISMENE.

[*Aside.*]

Cold ! I must bear that too. (*Aloud.*) Thou hear'st him,
king ;
Thou hear'st the insolence, which waxes bolder
Each day, as he expects thy lingering age
Will yield him Corinth's throne.

CREON.

Ungrateful boy !

Go, wander alien from my love ; avoid
The city's bounds ; and if thou dare return
Till I proclaim thy pardon, think to share
The fate of the rash slave for whom thou plead'st.

THOAS.

King, I will grovel in the dust before thee ;
Will give these limbs to torture ; nay, will strain
Their free-born sinews for thy very sport,
So thou recall the sentence on thy son.

CREON.

Thou wilt prolong his exile. To thy cell ! [*To* THOAS.
There wait thy time of death ;—my heart is sick—
But I have spoken.

HYLLUS.

Come with me, sweet sister,
And take a dearer parting than this scene
Admits. Look cheerily ;—I leave thy soul
A duty which shall lift it from the sphere
Of sighs and tremblings. Father, may the gods
So cherish thee that thou may'st never mourn,
With more than fond regret, the loss of one
Whose love stays with thee ever.

[*Exeunt* HYLLUS and CREUSA.

IPHITUS.

[*Offering to support* CREON.

Hold ! he faints !

CREON.

No ;—I can walk unaided—rest will soothe me.

[*Exit* CREON.

ISMENE.

Good night, my friends !

[Exeunt all but ISMENE, THOAS, and CALCHAS.]

Thou, Calchas, wait and guard
The prisoner to his cell. Thou know'st the place.

THOAS.

Lead on.

ISMENE.

[Coming to the front to THOAS.]

Thou wilt not sleep?

THOAS.

I wish no sleep
To reach these eyes, till the last sleep of all.

ISMENE.

Others may watch as well as thou.

THOAS.

Strange words
Thou speakest, fearful woman ; are they mockeries ?
Methinks they sound too solemn.

ISMENE.

Said I not,
I am of Athens ? Hush ! These walls have echoes ;
Thy gaoler is of Athens, too ; at midnight
He shall conduct thee where we may discourse
In safety. Wilt thou follow him ?

THOAS.

I will.

ISMENE.

'Tis well. Conduct the prisoner to his dungeon.
Remember, thou hast promis'd me.

THOAS.

My blood

Is cold as ice ; yet will I keep the faith
I plight to thee.

[*Exeunt* THOAS and CALCHAS.

ISMENE (*alone*).

It is the heroic form
Which I have seen in watching, and in sleep
Frightfully broken, through the long, long, years
Which I have wasted here in chains, more sad
Than those which bind the death-devoted slave
To his last stony pillow. Fiery shapes,
That have glar'd in upon my bed to mock
My soul with hopes of vengeance, keep your gaze
Fix'd stedfast on me now ! My hour is nigh !

[*Exit.*

END OF ACT II.

ACT III.

SCENE I.

The Dungeon in the Rock.

THOAS *discovered, alone.*

THOAS.

Ye walls of living rock, whose time-shed stains
Attest that ages have revolv'd since hands
Of man were arm'd to pierce your solid frame,
And, from your heart of adamant, hew out
Space for his fellow's wretchedness, I hail
A refuge in your stillness; tyranny
Will not stretch forth its palsied arm to fret
Its captive here. Ye cannot clasp me round
With darkness so substantial, as can shut
The airy visions from me which foreshew
The glories Athens will achieve, when I
Am passionless as ye. I hear a step!
It is that mournful lady's minister,
Who comes to waken feelings I would bid
For ever sleep. A light, as of a star,
Gleams in the narrow cavern's steep descent;

And now a form, as of a goddess, glides
To illuminate its blackness. 'Tis Creusa !
My heart is not yet stone.

Enter CREUSA.

I venture here

Thus boldly to perform a holy office,
Which should have been my brother's.—When he fled
The city of his nurture, his last thoughts
Were bent on his preserver ; he bequeathed
His strong injunction never to forsake
The aim of thy deliverance. I exult
That heaven thus far has prosper'd it ; be quick,
And follow me to freedom.

THOAS.

Did'st thou say

To freedom, lovely one ?

CREUSA.

If thou wilt haste ;

The path is clear ; the city wrapt in sleep ;
I know the pass-word at the gates—how learn'd
By quaint device, I'll tell thee when we meet
In safety,—if we ever meet again !

THOAS.

And dost thou wish it ?

CREUSA.

Do I wish it ? Yes !

And on the swift fulfilment of that wish
My life is wager'd.

THOAS.

There is more than life
To me in these sweet words—speak them again—
But no ;—once heard they linger on the ear
Which drank them in, for ever. Shapeless rocks
That witness to the sound, rejoice! No fane
Of alabaster while the breeze has slept
In circling myrtles, and the moon disclos'd
Young love's first blush to the rapt eyes of him
Whose happy boldness rais'd it, rivals you
In sanctity which rich affection lends
To things of earthly mould. Methinks ye spring
Rounded to columns; your dank mists are curl'd
Upwards in heavenly shapes, and breathe perfume,
While every niche which caught the music speeds
Delicious echoes to the soul. 'Twere bliss
To dwell for ever here.

CREUSA.

O linger not ;
The watch will change at midnight.

THOAS.

Midnight—Jove !—
I cannot go.

CREUSA.

Not go ! I ask no thanks—

No recompense—no boon,—save the delight
Of saving thee ; for this I've perill'd all—
Life, freedom, fame,—and now thou tell'st me, proud one,
That I have perill'd all in vain.

THOAS.

Forbear,
In mercy ; I have pledg'd my word to wait
A messenger the Queen will send at midnight,
To bring me to her presence.

CREUSA.

To the Queen ?

What would she with thee ? She is steel'd 'gainst nature ;
I never knew her shed a tear, nor heard
A sigh break from her,—oft she seeks a glen
Hard by the temple of avenging Jove,
Which sinks mid blasted rocks, whose narrow gorge
Scarce gives the bold explorer space ; its sides,
Glistening in marble blackness, rise aloft
From the scant margin of a pool, whose face
No breeze e'er dimpled ; in its furthest shade
A cavern yawns, where poisonous vapours rise
That none may enter 'it and live ; they spread
Their rolling films of ashy white like shrouds
Around the fearful orifice, and kill
The very lichens which the earthless stone
Would nurture ;—whether evil men, or things

More terrible, meet this sad lady there,
I know not—she will lead thee thither !

THOAS.

No—

Not if guilt point the way, if it be sorrow
I must endure it rather than the curse
Which lies upon the faithless heart of him
Who breaks a promise plighted to the wretched ;
For she *is* wretched.

CREUSA.

So am I. Methinks
I am grown selfish ; for it is not suffering
I dread should fall upon thee, but I tremble
Lest witchery of that awful woman's grief
Lead thee to some rash deed. Thou art a soldier,
A young proficient in the game of death,
And mayst be wrought on—

THOAS.

Do not fear for me ;
Where shews of glory beckon I'll not wait
To pluck away the radiant masks and find
Death under them ; but at the thought of blood
Shed save in hottest fight, my spirit shrinks
As from some guilt not aim'd at human things
But at the majesty of gods.

CREUSA.

Forgive me ;

It was a foolish terror swept across
My soul,—I should not have forgot 'twas mercy
That made thee captive.

Voice without.

Thoas !

THOAS.

I am call'd.

The voice came that way—still thy upward path
Is open—haste—he must not find thee here.

CREUSA.

My prayers—all that the weak can give—are thine.

Farewell ! *[Exit.*

THOAS.

The gods for ever guard thee !

She glides away—she gains the topmost ridge—
She's safe. Now can I welcome fate with bosom
Steel'd to endure the worst.

Voice without.

Thoas !

THOAS.

I come ! *[Exit.*

SCENE II.

The Hall of Statues, in CREON's Palace.

Enter ISMENE.

ISMENE.

Why tarries Calchas? It is past the hour
Of deepest night, when he should hither guide
The avenger of my sorrows. Gods of Athens!
Whom strong expostulation hath compell'd
To look upon my shames, one little hour
I ask your aid; that granted, never more
Shall the constraining force of passion break
Your dread repose. I hear a warrior's step—
Ye answer, and ye bless me.

Enter CALCHAS and THOAS.

It is well.

[*To CALCHAS.*

Withdraw, and wait without. I must confer
With this unyielding man, alone.

[*Exit CALCHAS.*

THOAS.

I wait

To learn thy will;—why thou hast bid me leave
The stubborn rock, where I had grown as dull,
As painless, as the cell to which thy breath
Consign'd me?—thou, who urg'd the king to wreak

His most inglorious spleen on one too low
To be mark'd out for anger, too resolv'd
To heed it !

ISMENE.

I beheld in thee a soldier,
Born of that glorious soil whose meanest son
Is nobler than barbarian kings, with arm
Worthy to serve a daughter, who has claim
On its best blood. But there is softness in thee,
Weakening thy gallant nature, which may need
The discipline of agony and shame
To master it. Hast thou already learn'd
Enough to steel thee for a generous deed ;
Or shall I wait till thou hast linger'd long
In sorrow's mighty school ? I'm mistress in it,
And know its lessons well.

THOAS.

If thou hast aught
Of honor to suggest, I need no more
To fit me for thy purpose ; if thy aim
Hath taint of treachery or meanness in it,
I think no pain will bend me to ~~thy~~ will ;
At least, I pray the gods so !

ISMENE.

Had'st thou borne
Long years of lingering wretchedness like mine,
Thou would'st not play the casuist thus. 'Tis well

For lusty youth, that casts no glance beyond
To-morrow's fight or game, which values life
A gewgaw, to be perill'd at a plunge
From some tall rock into an eddyng gulph,
For the next revel's glory, to collect
The blood into the cheek, and bravely march
Amidst admiring people to swift death,
And call its heedlessness of what it yields—
A sacrifice heroic. But who knows,
Who guesses, save the woman that endures,
What 'tis to pine each weary day in forms
All counterfeit;—each night to seek a couch
Throng'd by the phantoms of revenge, till age
Find her in all things weaken'd, save the wish,
The longing of the spirit, which laughs out
In mockery of the withering frame! O Thoas,
I have endured all this—I, who am sprung
From the great race of Theseus!

THOAS.

From the race
Of Theseus!—of the godlike man whose name
Hath shone upon my childhood as a star
With magic power?

ISMENE.

Reduc'd to basest needs
By slow decay in Attica, array'd

In hateful splendour here, I bear small trace
Of whence I sprung. No matter—spurn'd—disown'd
By living kindred, I have converse held
With those of my great family whom Death
Hath stripp'd of all but glory; and they wait
The triumph of this hour to hail me theirs.

THOAS.

Shame to our city, who allowed a matron
Of that great race to languish !

ISMENE.

Let it pass ;
A single grief—a short and casual wrong—
Which—in that sense of ages past and hopes
Resplendent for the future, which are center'd
In the great thought of country, and make rich
The poorest citizen who feels a share
In her—is nothing. Had she sought my blood,
To mingle with the dust before the rush
Of some triumphant entry, I had shed it ;
And while my life gush'd forth, had tasted joy
Akin to her rapt hero's. 'Tis thy lot—
Thy glorious lot—to give me all I live for,—
Freedom and vengeance.

THOAS.

What would'st have me do ?

E

ISMENE.

I have not wasted all the shows of power
Which mock'd my grief, but used them to conceal
The sparks which tyrant fickleness had lit,
And sloth had left to smoulder. In the depths
Of neighbouring caverns, foes of Creon meet
Who will obey thee ; lead them thence to-night—
Surprise the palace—slay this hated king,—
Or bear him as a slave to Athens.

THOAS.

Never !

I am a foe to Corinth—not a traitor,
Nor will I league with treason. In the love
Of my own land, I honour his who cleaves
To the scant graces of the wildest soil,
As I do to the loveliness, the might,
The hope, of Athens. Aught else man can do,
In honor, shall be thine.

ISMENE.

I thought I knew
Athenians well ; and yet, thy speech is strange.
Whence drew thou these affections,—whence these thoughts
Which reach beyond a soldier's sphere ?

THOAS.

From Athens ;
Her groves ; her halls ; her temples ; nay, her streets
Have been my teachers. I had else been rude,

For I was left an orphan, in the charge
Of an old citizen, who gave my youth
Rough though kind nurture. Fatherless, I made
The city and her skies my home; have watch'd
Her various aspects with a child's fond love;
Hung in chill morning o'er the mountain's brow,
And, as the dawn broke slowly, seen her grow
Majestic from the darkness, till she fill'd
The sight and soul alike; enjoy'd the storm
Which wrapt her in the mantle of its cloud,
While every flash that shiver'd it reveal'd
Some exquisite proportion, pictur'd once
And ever to the gazer;—stood entranc'd
In rainy moonshine, as, one side, uprose
A column'd shadow, ponderous as the rock
Which held the Titan groaning with the sense
Of Jove's injustice; on the other, shapes
Of dreamlike softness drew the fancy far
Into the glistening air; but most I felt
Her loveliness, when summer-evening tints
Gave to my lonely childhood sense of home.

ISMENE.

And was no spot amidst that radiant waste
A home to thee indeed?

THOAS.

The hut which held
My foster-father had for me no charms,

Save those his virtues shed upon its rudeness.
I lived abroad ;—and yet there is a spot
Where I have felt that faintness of the heart
Which traces of oblivious childhood bring
Upon ripe manhood ; where small heaps of stones,
Blacken'd by fire, bear witness to a tale
Of rapine which destroyed my mother's cot,
And bore her thence to exile.

ISMENE.

Mighty gods !

Where stand these ruins ?

THOAS.

On a gentle slope.

Broken by workings of an ancient quarry,
About a furlong from the western gate,
Stand these remains of penury ; one olive,
Projecting o'er the cottage site which fire
Had blighted, with two melancholy stems,
Stream'd o'er its meagre vestiges.

ISMENE.

'Tis plain !

Hold ! hold ! my courage. Let the work be done,
And then I shall aspire. I must not wait
Another hour for vengeance. Dreadful powers !
Who on the precipice's side at eve
Have bid gigantic shadows greyly pass
Before my mortal vision,—dismal forms

Of a fate-stricken race—I see HIM now,
Whom ye led follower of your ghastly train—
O nerve him for his office !

THOAS.

Fearful woman,
Speak thy command, if thou would have it reach
A conscious ear ; for whilst thou gazest thus,
My flesh seems hardening into stone ; my soul
Is tainted ; thought of horror courses thought
Like thunder-clouds swept wildly ;—yet I feel
That I must do thy bidding.

ISMENE.

It is well ;—

Hast thou a weapon ?

THOAS.

Yes ; the generous prince,
When I resign'd my arms, left me a dagger.

ISMENE.

The prince ! The Furies sent it by his hand,
For justice on his father.

THOAS.

On thy husband ?

ISMENE.

Husband ! Beware !—my husband moulders yet
Within his rusting armour ; such a word

From thee may pierce the rock beneath whose shade
He fell, and curse him with a moment's life
To blast thee where we stand. If this slight king,
In the caprice of tyranny was pleas'd
To deck me out in regal robes, dost think
That in his wayward smiles, or household taunts,
I can forget the wretchedness and shame
He hurl'd upon me once ?

THOAS.

What shame ?

ISMENE.

What shame !

Thou hast not heard it. Listen ! I was pluck'd
From the small pressure of an only babe,
And in my frenzy, sought the hall where Creon
Drain'd the frank goblet ; fell upon my knees ;
Embrac'd his foot-stool with my hungry arms,
And shriek'd aloud for liberty to seek
My infant's ashes, or to hear some news
Of how it perish'd ;—Creon did not deign
To look upon me, but with reckless haste
Dash'd me to earth ;—yes ; this disgrace he cast
On the proud daughter of a line which trac'd
Its skiey lineage to the gods, and bore
The impress of its origin,—on me,
A woman, and a mother !

THOAS.

Let me fly

And whet Athenian anger with thy wrongs—

My thoughts are strange and slaughterous.

ISMENE.

[*After a pause.*

Fly then! Yes!—

(*Aside.*) 'T will be as certain.—I will point a way
Will lead thee through a chamber to the terrace,
Whence thou may'st reach the wall. Thy only peril
Lies in that chamber. Mark me well;—if there
An arm be rais'd to stay thee—if a voice
Be heard—or if aught mortal meet thy sight,
Whate'er the form, thy knife is pledged to quench
The life that breathes there.

THOAS.

I obey. Farewell!

[*He takes her hand; she shivers; and drops it.*

ISMENE.

Hold off thy hand—it thrills me.—Swear!

THOAS.

By those

Who hover o'er us now, I swear!

ISMENE.

Be firm.

That is the door;—thou canst not miss the path.

Is thy steel ready?

THOAS.

Yes;—my breast is cold
As is that steel.

ISMENE.

Haste—the thick darkness wanes.

[*Exit* THOAS.]

Infernal powers! I thank ye—all is paid—
By thousand ecstasies in which my soul
Grows wanton. Calchas!

Enter CALCHAS.

Wish me joy, old servant!
What dost thou think of him who left me now?

CALCHAS.

A gallant soldier.

ISMENE.

'Tis my son—my own!
The very child for whom I knelt to Creon,
Is sent to give me justice. He is gone,
Arm'd with a dagger, thro' the royal chamber,
Sworn to strike any that may meet him there
A corpse before him. Dost thou think the king
Will see to-morrow?

CALCHAS.

He may slumber.

ISMENE.

No—

He hath sent his son to exile—he will wake —
I'm sure he will. There ! listen !—'twas a groan !
'Twill be but low—again ! 'Tis finish'd ! Shades
Of my immortal ancestry, look down,
And own me of your kindred !—Calchas, haste ;
Secure possession of the towers that guard
The city gates :—entrust them to our friends,
Who, when I give the word, will set them wide.
Haste, 'tis thy final labour. I shall soon
Be potent to reward the friends who clove
To me in my sad bondage.

CALCHAS.

Whither go'st thou ?

ISMENE.

To the pale shrine of her whose withering shield
Is dedicate to Athens. I have pray'd
At coldest midnight there, without a hope
Which might give ardour to my freezing veins.
I ask her to allay my raptures now,
By touch of marble—I require its chillness.
There I'll await the issue. It is sure !

[*Exeunt* ISMENE and CALCHAS.]

SCENE III.

The Outskirts of a Wood on one side ; the Athenian Camp on the other. A Watch-fire at a little distance, lighting the Scene.

PENTHEUS (*walking backwards and forwards as a Guard*).

The cold grey dawn begins to glimmer ; speed it,
Ye powers that favour Athens ! From the sea,
Her everlasting guardian, Phœbus, rise,
To pour auspicious radiance o'er the field,
In which she may efface the foul dishonour
Her arms own'd yesterday. Not shame alone,
But loss no morrow can repair, is hers !
Archas, our army's noble leader, sleeps
Beneath the pressure of a thousand shields ;
And Thoas, bravest of our youth, a slave—
Perchance, ere this a corpse. Friend whom I loved,
In whose advancing glories I grew proud
As though they had been mine—if yet thou breathest,
I will deliver, and if dead, avenge thee !
O, Thoas !

Enter THOAS wildly, from the Wood.

THOAS.

Who pronounc'd that wretched name,—
That name no honest tongue may utter more ?
Pentheus !

PENTHEUS.

Thoas ! most welcome. Thou art come in time
To share a glorious conflict. Ha ! thine eyes
Glare with a frightful light ;—be calm,—thou art safe ;—
This is the camp of those who will reward
Thy great emprise of yesterday, with place
Among the foremost in the battle. Come
To my exulting heart. [*Offering to embrace* THOAS.

THOAS.

No !—hold me from thee !—

My heart can ne'er know fellowship again
With such as thine ; for I have paid a price
For this vile liberty to roam abroad,
And cry to woods and rocks that answer me
With fearful echoes :—such a price, my Pentheus—
My own unspotted conscience. Dost not see
Foul spots of blood upon this slave's apparel,
Polluting e'en that dress ?

PENTHEUS.

If thou hast struck
Some soldier down to vindicate thy freedom,
Who shall accuse thee ?

THOAS.

'Twas no soldier, Pentheus ;
No stout opponent that my fatal knife
Dismiss'd to Erebus. A wither'd hand,

As from an old man, in the gloom stretch'd forth,
Scarce met my touch,—which could not have delay'd
My course an instant ;—'twas no thought of fear,
No haste for freedom, urged me,—but an oath
Glar'd on my soul in characters of flame,
And madden'd me to strike. I rais'd my arm,
And wildly hurl'd my dagger ;—nought but air
It seem'd to meet ;—but a sharp feeble sigh,
Such as death urges when it stops the gasp
Of wasting age, assur'd me it had done
A murderer's office.

PENTHEUS.

Think not of it thus :—
Thy lips are parch'd,—let me fetch water.

THOAS.

No !

I have drank fiercely at a mountain spring,
And left the stain of blood in its pure waters ;
It quench'd my mortal thirst, and I rejoic'd,
For I seem'd grown to demon, till the stream
Cool'd my hot throat, and then I laugh'd aloud,
To find that I had something human still.

PENTHEUS.

Fret not thy noble heart with what is past.

THOAS.

No !—'tis not past !—the murderer has no PAST :
But one eternal PRESENT.

HYLLUS. [*Within the wood.*

Help me !—answer !—

THOAS.

The voice of Hyllus !—of that noble youth,
Who, for my sake, is outcast from his home,
So near the camp of Athens ! Should our guards
Arrest him, he will perish. Friend ! That voice
Comes on my ear like that of one who serv'd me,
In yonder city ; leave thy watch to me
A moment.

PENTHEUS.

No—thy passion's dangerous ;

I dare not trust it.

THOAS.

See—I have subdu'd

The pang which wrung me. By our ancient loves
Grant me this boon—perhaps the last.

PENTHEUS.

Be quick,

For the watch presently will be remov'd,
And the trump call to battle.

[*Exit* PENTHEUS.]

THOAS. [*Calling to* HYLLUS.]

Here ! The hope

Of saving Hyllus wafts into my soul
A breath of comfort.

Enter HYLLUS.

HYLLUS.

I have lost my path,
Wandering the dismal night in this old wood ;
I'd seek the coast ; canst thou point out the way ?

THOAS.

Avoid it—on each side the Isthmus, ships
Of Athens ride at anchor.

HYLLUS. [*Recognising him.*]

Thoas ! free—
Then I am bless'd, and I can bear my lot,
However hard ;—I guess the hand that op'd
The dungeon door ;—how didst thou quit the palace ?

THOAS.

Why dost thou ask me that ? Through a large chamber
That open'd on a terrace—'twas all dark ;—
Tell me who lay there ?

HYLLUS.

'Tis my father's chamber,
Did he awake ?

THOAS.

Thy father ?—gods ! The king ?
The feeble old man with the reverend hair ?
Art sure he rested there ?

HYLLUS.

Sure. No one else
May enter after sunset, save the queen.

THOAS.

The queen ! all's clear ;—Jove strike me into marble !

HYLLUS.

Why dost thou tremble so ? as if a fit
Of ague shook thee.

THOAS.

Nothing—only thought
Of my past danger came upon my soul
And shook it strangely. Was the old man there ?

[Stands abstractedly as stupefied.]

PENTHEUS.

[Without.]

Thoas !

THOAS.

Haste !—Do not lose a moment—fly !
The watch-fire that is waning now is fed
By hands which, madden'd by the foul defeat
Of yesterday, will slay thee.

HYLLUS.

Whither fly ?
The camp of Athens is before me ;—ships
Of Athens line the coasts,—and Corinth's king

Hath driven me forth an exile. I'll return
And crave my father's pardon.

THOAS.

No—not there—
Yet, where should the poor stripling go? O Jove!
When he shall learn—

HYLLUS.

Farewell—yet hold an instant!—
Wilt thou not send some message to Creusa,
That she may greet her brother with a smile?

THOAS.

Creusa smile!—Methinks I see her now—
Her form expands—her delicate features grow
To giant stone; her hairs escape their band,
And stream aloft in air;—and now they take
The forms of fiery serpents—how they hiss—
And point their tongues at Thoas!

HYLLUS.

This is frenzy;
I cannot leave thee thus:—whate'er my fate,
I will attend and soothe thee.

THOAS.

Soothe me!—Boy,
Wouldst haunt me with that face which now I see
Is like thy father's. Ha! ha! ha! Thou soothe me—

Look not upon me; by this lurid light
Thou look'st a spectre. Hence, or I will rend thee!

HYLLUS.

I rather would die here.

THOAS.

Fool! fool! away!

[*Exit* HYLLUS.]

He's gone—yet *she* is with me still,—with looks
More terrible than anger;—take away
That patient face,—I cannot bear its sweetness;—
Earth, cover me! [*Falls on the ground.*]

Enter PENTHEUS.

PENTHEUS.

The troops are arming fast;
They call on thee to lead them.—Hark, the trump—
[*The trumpet sounds.*]

THOAS. [*Leaps up.*]

Yes; I will answer to its call. Again
Thou shalt behold me strike. In yonder field
I'll win that which I hunger for.

PENTHEUS.

A crown
Of laurel which hath floated in thy dreams
From thy brave infancy—

THOAS.

A grave! a grave! [*Exeunt.*]

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

ACT IV.

SCENE I.

The interior of the Funereal Grove at Corinth.

The Urn of CREON.

CREUSA discovered bending over it.

CREUSA.

'Tis strange!—I cannot weep for him; I've tried
To reckon every artifice of love
Which mid my father's waywardness proclaim'd
His tenderness unalter'd;—felt again
The sweet caresses infancy receiv'd,
And read the prideful look that made them sweeter,
Have run the old familiar round of things
Indifferent, on which affection hangs
In delicate remembrances which make
Each household custom sacred;—I've recall'd
From Memory's never-failing book of pain,
My own neglects of dutiful regard
Too frequent—all that should provoke a tear—
And all in vain. My feelings are as dull,
Mine eyes are rigid as when first they met

The horrid vision of his thin white hairs
Matted with blood. Gods ! let me know again
A touch of natural grief, or I shall go
Distract, and think the bloody form is here.

Enter HYLLUS.

Hyllus ! my brother ! thou wilt make me weep,
For we shall mourn as we were lov'd together.
Dost thou know all ?

HYLLUS.

Yes, all.—Alas ! Creusa,
He died in anger with me.

CREUSA.

Do not dwell
On that sad thought ;—but recollect the cause
Was noble—the defence of one whose soul
Claims kindred with thine own.

HYLLUS.

Unhappy sister,
What sorrow stranger than thy present grief
Awaits thee yet ! I cannot utter it.

CREUSA.

Speak ;—any words of thine will comfort me.

HYLLUS.

I fear thou must no longer link the thoughts
Of nobleness and Thoas.

CREUSA.

Then my soul
Must cease all thinkings ; for I've blended them
Till they have grown inseparate. What is this ?

HYLLUS.

That he hath made us orphans.

CREUSA.

He is free
From such ignoble guiltiness as thou.
What fury shed this thought into a soul
Once proud to be his debtor ?

HYLLUS.

Poor believer
In virtue's dazzling counterfeit, 'tis sad
To undeceive thee. At the break of day
I met the murderer, frantic from his crime,
In anguish which explain'd by after proofs
Attests his guilt.

CREUSA.

And is this all ? Hast said ?
All thou canst urge against the nobleness
Which breathes in every word ? Against thy life
Preserv'd at liberal hazard of his own ?
Against the love which I was proud to bear

For him, and that with which he more than paid me ?
He in some frenzy utter'd aimless words,
And thou at once believ'd him guilty. Go !
Haste and accuse him. Henceforth we are twain.

HYLLUS.

Sister, I never will accuse him.

CREUSA.

Take

My thanks for that small promise, though our souls,
While thine is tainted with this foul belief,
Can ne'er be mingled as they have been. Now
I see why I was passionless. Ismene
Bends her steps hither ; thou hadst best retire ;
She rules the city, for her secret friends
Cast off their masks, and own themselves the foes
Of Corinth's prince.

HYLLUS.

Beside my father's urn

I shall await her.

CREUSA.

I will not expose

My anguish to her cold and scornful gaze ;—
Brother, farewell awhile ; we are divided,
But I will bless thee.

[*Exit.*

Enter ISMENE and Guards.

ISMENE.

Wherefore art thou here,
Despite the sentence which the king pronounc'd
Of exile?

HYLLUS.

I have come to mourn a father,
Whose words of passion had been long unsaid,
Had his kind heart still throbb'd; and next, to claim
My heritage.

ISMENE.

Thine!—win it if thou canst——

Enter CALCHAS.

How stands the battle?

CALCHAS.

Corinth's soldiers fly,
Routed in wild disorder. Thoas leads
The troops of Athens, and will soon appear
In triumph at our gates.

ISMENE.

Leads, say'st thou?—leads?
Let Corinth's gates stand open to admit
The hero,—give him conduct to the hall,
Where sculptur'd glories of Corinthian kings

Shall circle him who sham'd them,—there, alone,
I would crave speech with him. [*Exit* CALCHAS.

HYLLUS. [*To the Soldiers.*

My countrymen,
Will ye endure this shame? I am a youth
Unskill'd in war; but I have learn'd to die
When life is infamy. If ye will join me,
We'll close the gates with ramparts of the slain.
Does no heart answer mine?

ISMENE.

Their swords shall curb
Thy idle ravings. Athens triumphs now!—
Attend him to his chamber, and beware
He leaves it not.

HYLLUS.

For this I ought to thank thee:
I would not see my country's foul disgrace;
But thou shalt tremble yet. [*Exit, guarded.*

ISMENE.

Now shall I clasp him—
Clasp him a victor o'er my country's foes;—
The slayer of him most hated. Double transport!
The dream of great revenge I lived upon
Was never bright with image of such joy,
And now comes link'd with vengeance! Thoas, haste!
[*Exit.*

SCENE II.

Before the Gates of Corinth.

Shouts without.

*Enter THOAS in armour, with his sword drawn, and
Athenian Soldiers, as in pursuit.*

THOAS.

Here we may breathe awhile from conquest ; 'twas
A noble chase, we scarce may call it battle ;
Success so quick hath followed on success,
That we shall want more time to count our glories
'Than we have spent in winning them. The foe
Is niggard, and will not allow our arms
One day of conflict. We have won too soon.
Grant me, great gods, instead of years of life,
Another such an hour !

SOLDIER.

My lord, here's wine ;
'Tis from the tents of Corinth.

THOAS.

Not a drop.

My heart's too light—too jocund, to allow
Another touch of ecstasy, deriv'd
From mortal fruitage ; nay, were it Jove's nectar,
I'd set the untasted cup of crystal down,
And wait till all our glorious work were finish'd !

Soldiers ! we sup in Corinth ! You'll not wait
Past time of hunger, if ye are not faint
With rapid conquest.

Enter PENTHEUS and Soldiers.

PENTHEUS.

Noble leader, hail !

Thy country's heroes bless thee with the sense
Of their delighted wonder ! With one voice
They greet thee as the winner of this fight,
To which thou led them. Never was a scheme
Of battle, plann'd in council of the sage,
Form'd with a skill more exquisite than that
Which, in the instant thou wert call'd to lead us,
Flash'd on thy spirit, and in lines of fire
From thine was manifest to ours ! Art wounded ?

THOAS.

A very scratch ; I blush to think no more :
Some frolic blood let in the strife had serv'd
To moderate my fervours.

PENTHEUS.

See ; our comrades

Have snatched a branch from the Corinthian laurels
(Which now I fear must wither) for a wreath
To grace thy brow ! Soldiers, 'tis much I ask ;
But when I tell ye I have watch'd your chief

From the first flash that dazzled in his eye
At tale of glory, ye may yield to me
The proud delight of offering him this honor.

[*Soldier gives the wreath to PENTHEUS, who gives it to*

THOAS.

PENTHEUS.

I thank ye, comrades.

THOAS.

The immortal gods
Grant me a double blessing in the friend
From whom I take this happiness. O, Pentheus!
I have mus'd fondly—proudly—on the fate
Which waits upon my country; when the brow
Which thou wouldst deck, was bar'd to mist and storm;
When every moonlit fountain which displaced
The blackness of the moss-grown hillock told
Of the pure beauty which her name should keep,
Empearling starless ages; when each wave
That rippled in her harbour to my ear
Spoke glad submission to the Queen of Cities;
But never, 'mid my burning hopes for Athens,
Did I believe that *I* should stand thus crown'd,
Her laurell'd soldier! Friends, the sun-light wanes,
And we must sup in Corinth!

PENTHEUS.

Sec, the gates
Open to welcome us!

[*The gates open.*

THOAS.

Without a blow ?

We shall not earn our banquet. So expands
Before the vision of my soul, the east
To the small cluster of our godlike sons.
Let Asia break the mirror of our seas
With thousand sterns of ivory, and cast
The glare of gold upon them to disturb
The azure hue of heaven, they shall be swept
As glittering clouds before the sun-like face
Of unapplianced virtue ! Friends, forgive me ;
I have been used to idle thought, nor yet
Have learn'd to marry it to action. Blest
To-day in both.

PENTHEUS.

A herald from the city.

Enter CALCHAS.

CALCHAS.

I am commission'd by the queen to speak
With Thoas.

THOAS.

I am here.

[*Trembles, and supports himself, as paralysed, on*

PENTHEUS.

Thou art commission'd
From the infernal powers to cross my path

Of glorious triumph, with a shape that brings
Before me terrible remembrance, which
Had strangely vanish'd from me.

PENTHEUS. *[To the Soldiers.]*

He is ill,—

Retire.

THOAS.

No—should the herald fade in air
He would not leave his office unfulfill'd,
One look hath smit my soul.

PENTHEUS.

Is this a dream?

THOAS.

No—'tis a dreadful waking—I have dreamt
Of honour, and have struggled in my dream
For Athens, as if I deserved to fight
Unsullied in her cause. The joy of battle
In eddies as a whirlpool had engulf'd
The thought of one sad moment, when my soul
Was blasted; but it rises in the calm,
Like to a slaughter'd seaman, who pursues
The murderous vessel which swept proudly on,
When his death-gurgle ended. Hence, vain wreath!—
Thou wouldst entwine my brow with serpent coldness,
And wither instant there. *[Tears the wreath.]*

So vanish all
My hopes; they are gone—I'm fit to answer thee
Who sent thee here? [To CALCHAS.

CALCHAS.
The queen.

THOAS.
A worthy mistress
Of such a slave—thy errand?

CALCHAS.
She who rules
In Corinth now, admits the victor's power,
And bids the gates thus open: she requires
A conference with Thoas in the hall
Next to the royal chamber—thou hast been
There, as I think, my lord.

THOAS.
I know full well,
Lead, dreadful herald, on.

PENTHEUS.
The troops attend
The order of their general.

THOAS. [To CALCHAS.
Why dost wait?
Thou see'st that I obey thy call.

PENTHEUS.

My friend,
Thy blood is fever'd—thou may'st choose thy time—
Postpone this meeting.

THOAS.

[To CALCHAS.]

Why dost tarry? turn
Thy face away—it maddens me—go on!

[Exit after CALCHAS.]

SOLDIER.

[To PENTHEUS.]

My lord, we wait for orders; this strange man,
Half warrior and half rhapsodist, may bring
Our army into peril.

PENTHEUS.

Fear it not;

He has all elements of greatness in him,
Although as yet not perfectly commingled,
Which is sole privilege of gods. They cast
Such piteous weakness on the noblest men
That we may feel them mortal. 'Tis a cloud
Which speedily will pass, and thou shalt see
The hero shine as clearly forth in council
As he has done in victory. Meanwhile
He leaves us pleasant duty—form your lines—
Sound trumpets—march triumphant into Corinth!

[The Athenians enter Corinth.]

SCENE III.

The Hall of Statues in the Palace, same as in Third Act.

THOAS.

[*Alone.*

Again I stand within this awful hall ;
I found the entrance here, without the sense
Of vision ; for a foul and clinging mist,
Like the damp vapour of a long-closed vault,
Is round me. Now its objects start to sight
With terrible distinctness ! Crimson stains
Break sudden on the walls ! The fretted roof
Grows living ! Let me hear a human voice,
Or I shall play the madman !

Enter ISMENE, richly dressed.

ISMENE.

Noble soldier,
I bid thee welcome, with the rapturous heart
Of one, for whom thy patriot arm hath wrought
Deliverance and revenge—but more for Athens
Than for myself, I hail thee : why dost droop ?
Art thou oppressed with honours, as a weight
Thou wert not born to carry ? I will tell
That which shall show thee native to the load,

And will requite thee with a joy as great
As that thou hast conferr'd. Thy life was hid
Beneath inglorious accident, till force
Of its strong current urged it forth to day,
To glisten and expand in sun-light. Know
That it has issu'd from a fountain great
As is its destiny.—Thou sharest with me
The blood of Theseus.

THOAS.

If thy speech is true,
And I have something in me which responds
To its high tidings, I am doom'd to bear
A heavier woe than I believ'd the gods
Would ever lay on mortal; I have stood
Unwittingly upon a skiey height,
By ponderous gloom encircled,—thou hast shown
The mountain-summit mournfully revers'd
In the black mirror of a lurid lake,
Whose waters soon shall cover me,—I've stain'd
A freeman's nature; thou hast shown it sprung
From gods and heroes, and wouldst have me proud
Of the foul sacrilege.

ISMENE.

If that just deed,
Which thus disturbs thy fancy, were a crime,
What is it in the range of glorious acts,
Past and to come, to which thou art allied,

But a faint speck, an atom, which no eye
But thine would dwell on?

THOAS.

It infests them all,
Spreads out funereal blackness as they pass
In sad review before me. Hadst thou pour'd
This greatness on my unpolluted heart,
How had it bounded ! now it tortures me,
From thee, fell sorceress, who snar'd my soul
Here—in this very hall !—May the strong curse
Which breathes from out the ruins of a nature
Blasted by guilt—

ISMENE.

Hold ! Parricide—forbear !
She whom thou hast aveng'd, she whom the death
Of Creon hath set free, whom thou wouldst curse,
Is she who bore thee !

THOAS.

Thou !

ISMENE.

Dost doubt my word ?
Is there no witness in thy mantling blood
Which tells thee whence 'twas drawn ? Is nature silent ?
If, from the mists of infancy, no form
Of her who, sunk in poverty, forgot
Its ills in tending thee, and made the hopes

Which glimmer'd in thy smiles her comfort,—gleams
Upon thee yet ;—hast thou forgot the night
When foragers from Corinth toss'd a brand
Upon the roof that shelter'd thee ; dragg'd out
The mother from the hearth-stone² where she sat,
Resign'd to perish, shrieking for the babe
Whom from her bosom they had rent ? That child
Now listens. As in rapid flight, I gazed
Backward upon the blazing ruin, shapes
Of furies, from amid the fire, look'd out
And grinn'd upon me. Every weary night
While I have lain upon my wretched bed,
They have been with me, pointing to the hour
Of vengeance. Thou hast wrought it for me, son !
Embrace thy mother.

THOAS.

Would the solid earth
Would open, and enfold me in its strong
And stifling grasp, that I might be as though
I ne'er was born.

ISMENE.

Dost mock me ? I have clasp'd
Sorrow and shame as if they were my sons,
To keep my heart from hardening into stone ;
The promis'd hour arriv'd ; and when it came,
The furies, in repayment, sent an arm,

Moulded from mine, to strike the oppressor dead.
I triumph'd,—and I sent thee!

THOAS.

Dost confess
That, conscious who I was, thou urg'd my knife
Against the king?

ISMENE.

Confess!—I glory in it!—

Thy arm hath done the purpose of my will;
For which I bless it. Now I am thy suitor.
Victorious hero! Pay me for those cares
Long past, which man ne'er guesses at;—for years
Of daily, silent suffering, which young soldiers
Have not a word to body forth; for all,—
By filling for a moment these fond arms,
Which held thee first.

THOAS. [*Shrinking from her.*]

I cannot. I will kneel,

To thank thee for thy love, ere thou didst kill
Honour and hope;—then grovel at thy feet,
And pray thee trample out the wretched life
Thou gav'st me.

ISMENE.

Ha! Beware, unfeeling man:—

I had oppos'd, had crush'd all human loves,
And they were wither'd; thou hast call'd them forth,

Rushing in crowds from memory's thousand cells,
To scoff at them. Beware ! They will not slumber,
But sting like scorpions.

Enter IPHITUS.

Wherefore dost intrude
On this high conference ?

IPHITUS.

The people cry
That solemn inquisition should be held
For Creon's blood ;—else do they fear the gods
Will visit it on them.

ISMENE.

They need not fear.
It will be well aveng'd.

IPHITUS.

To thee, Ismene,
That which I next must speak, is of dear import ;—
Wilt hear it in this noble stranger's presence ?

ISMENE.

Say on, old man.

IPHITUS.

From the old crumbling altar,
Just as the gates were open'd, breath'd a voice
In whisper low, yet heard through each recess
Of Jove's vast temple, bidding us to seek

Of thee, Ismene, who the murderer is,
And summon thee to the same fearful spot,
To speak it there.

ISMENE.

[*To* THOAS.

Athenian ! dost thou hear ?

THOAS.

I hear.

IPHITUS.

The hostile nations lay aside
Their quarrel, till this justice to the dead
Is render'd. Chiefs of each will guard the fane,
And wait the solemn issue.—In their name,
And in the mightier name of him whose shrine
Hath burst long silence, I command thee, queen,
'Thou presently be there.

ISMENE.

I shall obey—

Beside the altar place the regal seat ;
And there, in state befitting Corinth's queen,
I'll take my place.

[*To* THOAS.Farewell ! *Thou* wilt be there !

THOAS.

Be sure I will not fail.

ISMENE.

'Tis well ! 'Tis well !

[*Exit.*

IPHITUS.

Thou saidst thou shouldst attend ?

THOAS.

I shall. What more
Would'st thou have with me ?

IPHITUS.

I would ask a band
Of the most noble of Athenian youth,
To witness this procedure ; and to lend
Their conduct, should the murderer stand reveal'd,
To keep the course of justice unassail'd,
And line the path of death.

THOAS.

All that can make
The wretch accurs'd, shall wait him. Let me breathe
Alone a moment. [Exit IPHITUS.]

How they'll start to see
The guilty one descend the solemn steps,
And hang their heads for shame, and turn their eyes
In mercy from him. [Going.]

Enter CREUSA.

CREUSA.

For a moment hear me—
I would not break on thy triumphant hours,
But for my brother's sake. Do not refuse,

For, if he wrong'd thee by a frantic thought,
There was one ready to defend thy honour
From slightest taint !

THOAS.

What taint ? the breath of infamy
Spreads o'er my name already !

CREUSA.

Do not ask—
'Twas a wild thought ;—but there are tongues which make
As false a charge ; tongues which have power to crush
The guiltless !—They have murmur'd that this crime
Is that of Hyllus !

THOAS.

Hyllus the unsullied !

CREUSA.

I knew that thou would'st say so—that no force
Of circumstance would weigh in thy pure thought
Against the beauty of his life. They found him
Just after day-break, suddenly return'd
From exile, in the chamber of the king,
Gazing with bloodless aspect on a sight
Of bloodshed ;—yet thou dost not think 'twas he
That with a craven hand—

THOAS.

O no !

CREUSA.

And thou
Wilt plead his cause—wilt save him from the fate
That threatens his young life?

THOAS.

My own shall first
Be quench'd !

CREUSA.

The gods repay thee for the word !
O brother, brother ! could'st thou wrong this heart
With one suspicion ? Why dost turn away,
And shrink and shudder in the warrior's dress,
As when I thank'd thee for that brother's life,
At the slave's vest which then, in thy proud thought,
Debas'd the wearer ?

THOAS.

O, I thought so then !
Now I would give the treasures of the deep,
Nay more—the hope of glory—to resume
Those servile garments with the spotless thoughts
Of yesterday.

Enter Messenger.

MESSENGER.

My general, Pentheus, asks
If, by thy sanction, Iphitus requires
His presence in the temple ?

THOAS.

Pentheus?—Yes.

CREUSA. [THOAS *turns away*.

Why in the temple? wilt not speak?

MESSENGER.

The priest

There summons all to some high trial.

CREUSA.

I see it!—

They meet to judge my brother. I will fly—

THOAS.

Thou must not, lady—in that fearful place,
Horrors unguess'd at by thy gentle nature
Will freeze thy youthful blood, that thou shalt pass
No happy moment more.

CREUSA.

And what have I
To do with happiness? I am not young,
For I grew old in moments charg'd with love
And anguish. Now I feel that I could point
The murderer out with dreadful skill—could mark
The livid paleness, read the shrinking eye,
Detect the empty grasping of the hand
Renewing fancied slaughter;—why dost turn
Thus coldly from me?—Ah! thou hast forgot

The vows which, when in slavery, thou offer'd,
And I was proud to answer—if not, Thoas,
Once press my hand ; O gods ! he lets it fall !—
So withers my last hope—so my poor heart
Is broken.

[*Faints.*]

THOAS.

[*To Messenger.*]

Take her gently in. [*Messenger supports her out.*]

THOAS.

One glance. [*Looks at her and shudders.*]

O that the beauty I have lov'd and worshipp'd
Should be a thing to shiver me !—'Tis just.

[*Exit.*]

END OF ACT IV.

ACT V.

SCENE I.

The Interior of the Temple of Jupiter the Avenger—ISMENE seated in the midst, in a Chair of State—Corinthians on the right, and Athenians on the left, side of the Temple—At the extremity on the right side, HYLLUS standing—At the extremity of the left, THOAS seated.

IPHITUS.

Corinthians and Athenians ! late opposed
In mortal conflict, dedicated now
To solemn work of Justice, hear the will
Of the Avenging Power, beneath whose roof
Ye stand thus marshall'd. Royal blood hath stain'd
A palace floor ;—not shed in blazing war,
But in night's peace ; not some hot soldier's blood,
But the thin current of a frame made sacred
To Orcus' gentlest arrow. Heaven requires
Both nations to unite in dealing death
Upon the slayer, who, unslain, will draw
Its withering curse on both. In yonder shrine
Which dim tradition's fearful whispers made

A terror to my infancy, a voice,
Which breath'd fell murmurs to ancestral ears,
Breaks centuries of silence to pronounce
The Queen as gifted to direct the shaft
To the curs'd head ;—and every sign around us
By which the world invisible, when charg'd
With bloody secret, struggles to subdue
Things visible to organs which may send
Its meaning to the startled soul, attest
The duty I assume.—Ismene !

ISMENE.

Priest

Of Jove, I am attendant to thy summons ;—
What is thy wish ?

IPHITUS.

Sad widow of a king
Whose feeble life some cruel hand hath stopp'd,
I do adjure thee, by these hoary hairs,
That chang'd their hue from raven whilst thou shar'd
His mansion ;—by celestial powers, who watch
Our firmness now ;—and by those fearful gods,
Whom 'tis unblest to mention, lay aside
All terror, all affection, all remorse,—
If cause of penitence thou hast, to rend
The veil of darkness which the murderer wears,
And give him to his destiny. Begin

The solemn strain which shall attune our souls
To hearken and to execute !

[*Solemn music.*

IPHITUS.

Ismene,

Speak : Dost thou know the slayer ?

ISMENE.

Yes !

IPHITUS.

Dost thou

Behold him now ?

ISMENE. [*Looking wildly round.*

I do not see the faces

Or know the names of all. Who is the man

That at the right side of the circle stands ?

IPHITUS.

The youth with head erect and cloudless brow ?

That is the orphan'd Hyllus.

ISMENE.

Who is he

That sits upon the the other side, apart,

With face averted ?

[THOAS *turns his head suddenly, and looks upon her.*

I behold him now.

It is a dreadful duty you exact

From me—a woman. If I speak the name,

What sentence follows ?

IPHITUS.

Death !

ISMENE.

And soon performed ?

IPHITUS.

The Fates require that he thou shalt denounce
As guilty, must be led in silence hence,
And none behold him after, save his slayers.
Attend once more ! Thou hast declared thou know'st
The guilty one ! I ask thee—is he here ?

ISMENE.

O Gods ! He is.

IPHITUS.

Name him !

CALCHAS.

She shudders ! See,—

I think she cannot speak !

IPHITUS.

If quivering tongue

Refuse its office, point the victim out.

[ISMENE rises ; turns towards THOAS, who rises, and
confronts her ; she trembles, pauses, and resumes her seat.

IPHITUS.

Thou hast confess'd the guilty one is here ;
Where stands he ?

[ISMENE rises ; points to HYLLUS, shrieks “ There ! ” and
falls back senseless in her chair.

THOAS.

'Tis false !

[CREUSA *rushes forward and embraces* HYLLUS.

CREUSA.

Most false ! O murderess !

Protect him, noble Thoas !

HYLLUS.

Peace, my sister :—

Implore no mortal aid ; let us be patient,

And suffer calmly what the gods decree.

My life may satisfy.

IPHITUS.

It cannot be !

Hold—stir not—breathe not—from that shrine the voice

Of heaven will answer hers. Do ye not hear ? [A pause.

Hark !—It is voiceless, and the youth is doom'd.

THOAS.

Forbear, ye murderous judges ;—look upon him !

See on his forehead Nature's glorious seal

Of innocence, outspeaking thousand voices,

Which shining in the presence of the gods

Still shows him guiltless.

IPHITUS.

Prove it.

THOAS.

With my life-blood !

O could ye place me in some dizzy cleft

Of inmost Thracian hills, when ribb'd with ice,
 To hear from every rocky shelf a howl
 Of wolves arous'd to famine,—I would stand—
 Calm,—O far calmer than I stand,—to wait
 Their fangs, and let my tortur'd sinews' strength
 Attest his cause ;—'twere nothing—'twere no pain—
 To what the spirit feels. Thou talk'st of curses :
 Beware ! There is no curse with such a power
 As that of guiltless blood pour'd out by mortals
 In the mock'd name of justice.

HYLLUS.

[To THOAS, *aside*.

Thou wilt tell
 Thy secret ;—keep it. Leave me to my doom.

THOAS.

Never ! Corinthians, hear me——

ISMENE.

[*Recovering*.

What is this ?
 Why waits the parricide still there ? Who dares
 Dispute my sentence ?

THOAS.

I !

ISMENE.

Be silent. She
 Who most in all the world should have command
 O'er thee, requires thy silence.

PENTHEUS. [*Stepping forward from
the Athenian rank.*

By what right
Dost thou—Queen of the vanquish'd—dare command
The leader of the conquerors?

ISMENE.

By a mother's.

[*THOAS sinks into his seat—ISMENE descends and
stands beside him.*

ISMENE.

Athenians—victors!—'tis your fitting name,
By which I joy to greet you. Ye behold
One whom ye left to suffer, but who boasts
Your noblest blood. See! I command my son
To quit this roof, and leave me to the work
The gods have destined for me.

THOAS.

Stand aside!

I have a suit I would prefer alone,
Which may save guilt and sorrow.

IPHITUS.

[*To* HYLLUS.

Lean on me.

To THOAS.] Be brief.

HYLLUS.

I have no need; yet I will take
This thy last kindness; for I can accept it
Without a blush or shudder.

[All retire, leaving THOAS and ISMENE in front.]

THOAS.

Why hast heap'd
Foul crime on crime ?

ISMENE.

Son ! there has been no crime
Except for thee. The love that thou hast scorn'd
From the heart's long-closed shrine, outwhisper'd fate,
And saved thee.

THOAS.

Saved me ! Thou mayest save me yet ;
Recall thy sentence. Give me truth and death !

ISMENE.

And own my falsehood ? No ! Let us go hence
Together.

THOAS.

And permit this youth to die !
O that some god would mirror to my soul
Our mortal passage, while the arid sand
We pace ; the yellow, sunless, sky above us ;
And forms distort with anguish, which shall meet
Each vain attempt to be alone, enclose
The conscious blasters of the earth, till forced
To gaze upon each other, we behold,
As in eternal registry, the curse
Writ in the face of each ! No ; let us pray
For torture and for peace !

ISMENE.

If thou remain,
And risk dishonour to our house and me,
The poisonous cave below shall be my home,
And shelter me for ever !

THOAS.

Thou art brave,
As fits a matron of heroic line ;
Be great in penitence, and we shall meet
Absolv'd, where I may join my hand to thine,
And walk in duteous silence by thy side.

ISMENE.

And couldst thou love me then ?

THOAS.

Love thee ! My mother,
When thou didst speak that word, the gloom of years
Was parted,—and I knew again the face
Which linger'd o'er my infancy,—so pale,
So proud, so beautiful ! I kneel again,
A child, and plead to that unhardened heart,
By all the long past hours of priceless love,
To let my gushing soul pass forth in grace,
And bless thee in its parting !

ISMENE.

Never !

THOAS.

[*Rising.*

Yes !

Haste ere the roof shall fall, and crush the germ
Of sweet repentance in us ; take thy seat,
And speak as thy heart dictates—

[*Drawing ISMENE towards her seat.*

Hear again !

ISMENE.

Unhand me—rebel son ! Assembled Chiefs,
Ye called me—I have spoken once—I speak
No more ; make way there !—I must pass alone !

[*Exit ISMENE.*

THOAS.

[*Calling to ISMENE.*

O ! mother, stay ! She's gone.

[*Sinks into his chair.*

IPHITUS.

Her word decides,
Unless the gods disown it. Peace ! the altar
Is silent ; the last moment presses on us—
Hyllus, the doom'd, stand forth !

CREUSA.

O pause ; to thee
Thoas, I call ; thou know'st him guiltless.

IPHITUS.

Hold !

No mortal passion can have utterance here,
When Fate is audible. To yield is ours ;
Be calm as Hyllus, or forego his hand.

[CREUSA *sinks on her knees beside* HYLLUS; IPHITUS *lays one hand on the head of* HYLLUS, *and raises the other towards heaven.*

IPHITUS.

Dread Power, that bade us to this fane, accept
The expiation that we offer now,
And let this blood poured forth atone.

[THOAS *suddenly falls from his seat to the ground.*

CREUSA *rushes to him, and all surround him.*

CREUSA.

Gods! what is this new horror?

[*Opening the vest of* THOAS, *the dagger falls from it.*

THOAS.

There! 'Tis done!

'Tis well accomplish'd.

CREUSA.

Hyllus, go!

Brother, no more—for thee he perishes.

THOAS.

I will not purchase a last taste of sweetness
By such estrangement. That steel bears the blood
Of Creon and his slayer;—how excus'd
I leave you, generous king, to witness for me.

Enter CALCHAS.

CALCHAS.

The queen !

THOAS.

Hold life a moment—what of her?

CALCHAS.

She rush'd,

With looks none dared to question, to the cave ;
Paused at its horrid portal ; toss'd her arms
Wildly abroad ; then drew them to her breast,
As if she clasp'd a vision'd infant there ;
And as her eye, uplifted to the crag,
Met those who might prevent her course, withdrew
Her backward step amidst the deadly clouds
Which veil'd her—till the spectral shape was lost,
Where none dare ever tread to seek for that
Which was Ismene.

THOAS.

Peace be with her ! Pentheus,
Thy hand ;—let Hyllus reign in honour here ;—
Convey me to the city of my love ;
Her future years of glory stream more clear
Than ever on my soul. O Athens ! Athens !

[*Dies.*

HYLLUS.

Sister !

CREUSA.

Forgive me, brother.

[*Falls on the neck of Hyllus.*

HYLLUS.

Weep there ; 'tis thy home.
Fate, that has smitten us so young, leaves this—
That we shall cleave together to the grave.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

THE END.

BRADBURY AND EVANS,
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WHITEFRIARS.